

# Kin Keeping and Family Storytelling in Nineteenth-century French-Canadian Immigrant Letters: The Bergevin Corpus

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*This article analyses a new archive of French-Canadian immigrant letters through the combined, trifocal lens of kin keeping and family narrative, immigrant letters, and family correspondence. Letters are the ideal access point to both the historical construction of family identity through storytelling and the kin-keeping practices that sustain it. We look at a correspondence among the large Montreal-area Bergevin family, some of whose siblings migrated westward in the 1850s and 1860s to Walla Walla, Washington, where their surviving letters, a gift from descendants, now grace a local archive. Within this family, we look at the mechanisms of kin keeping, the designation and transference of the kin-keeping role among women, and at the epistolary construction and eventual demise of a shared family identity.*

*Le présent article analyse, dans des archives nouvellement constituées, les lettres d'immigrants canadiens-français à travers le triple prisme du roman familial et de l'entretien de la parenté, des lettres d'immigrants et de la correspondance familiale. La correspondance représente un point d'accès idéal à la construction historique de l'identité familiale par le biais des récits en même temps qu'aux pratiques d'entretien de la parenté qui la confortent. Nous examinons la correspondance entretenue au sein de la famille Bergevin, dans la région du grand Montréal, famille dont quelques membres avaient émigré vers l'ouest dans les années 1850 et 1860 pour s'installer à Walla Walla, dans l'État de Washington, où les lettres qui leur ont survécu figurent à présent honorablement dans des archives locales, grâce à un don de leurs descendants. Nous observons, au sein de cette famille, les mécanismes d'entretien de la parenté, la désignation des femmes jouant ce rôle dans la famille et la transmission de ce rôle, la construction épistolaire d'une identité familiale commune ainsi que, finalement, sa disparition.*

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SOCIOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP on kin keeping and family narrative uses principally interviews with people alive today. Research on immigrant letters has concentrated on their historical, narrative content, either as a source of information about larger population movements or as a window into the individual, intimate experience of migration and acculturation. Work on family letters, particularly in France, has investigated correspondence as a network, a system whose essential obligation is its own affirmation and perpetuation, but largely stops short of the question of kin work and rejects its systematic gendering.

This paper brings together these three areas of scholarship to analyse the construction and performance of family in a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French-Canadian immigrant correspondence, specifically the Bergevin family letters in Walla Walla, Washington, USA, for the period 1880-1922.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a close reading of the letters and extensive genealogy research, I explore how a historical correspondence can provide a solid basis to investigate kin keeping and family narrative within an immigrant population.

### Kin Keeping

Kin keeping refers to the communication tasks that sustain connections among extended family networks. Carolyn J. Rosenthal defines kin keeping as the “efforts expended on behalf of keeping family members in touch with one another” and identifies these endeavours as a response to disruptors, such as “death, geographical and social mobility, [and] immigration.” These tasks, primarily performed by women, fall usually to one or a few designated family members, who Rosenthal calls the “kin keepers”.<sup>2</sup>

Later research expands on Rosenthal’s emphasis on communication work as the core task of kin keepers. In her study of kin keeping in contemporary Italian-American families in northern California, Micaela di Di Leonardo emphasizes the aspect of connection despite separation; kin keeping is “the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents, and cards to kin; the organization of holiday gatherings.”<sup>3</sup> Margaret Leach and Dawn Braithwaite likewise center their analysis of kin keeping on communication, identifying five functions: “providing information, facilitating rituals, providing assistance, maintaining family relationships, and continuing a previous kinkeeper’s work.”<sup>4</sup> All four found that

1 The documents of the Bergevin collection, gifts from four donors, are in the Whitman College and Northwest Archives (hereafter WCNA) in Walla Walla, WA: Denise Bergevin O’Byrne Papers, WCMss 343; Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344; Joan Patricia Remillard Yenney Papers, WCMss 345; and J. Frank Munns Papers, WCMss 348.

2 Carolyn J. Rosenthal, “Kinkeeping in the Familial Division of Labor,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* vol. 47, no. 4 (1985), pp. 965–974. Cécile Dauphin identifies the phenomenon of the designated letter-writer but does not connect it to sociological work on kin keepers in Cécile Dauphin, Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat, and Danièle Poublan, *Ces bonnes lettres : une correspondance familiale au XIXe siècle*, Bibliothèque Albin Michel Histoire (Paris : Albin Michel, 1995), p. 177.

3 Micaela di Leonardo, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship,” *Signs* vol. 12 (1987), pp. 440–453.

4 Margaret Leach and Dawn Braithwaite, “A Binding Tie: Supportive Communication of Family Kinkeepers,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* vol. 24 (1996), pp. 200–216.

women performed most kin-keeping work (84 per cent of Leach and Braithwaite's kin keepers were women, and 74 per cent of Rosenthal's). Di Leonardo observes that "the very existence of kin contact and holiday celebration depended on the presence of an adult woman in the household."<sup>5</sup>

These authors' emphasis on communication-based kin work in the context of separation parallels the defining situation of immigrant correspondence: the exchange of letters between a migrant and his or her family or community of origin. In the case of the Bergevins, the separation of migration renders transparent the intentionality and effort involved in kin keeping. Through the kin keeping efforts of two key individuals—Sister Marie Augustin (1833–1899), of the Sœurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et Marie (SNJM), and her sister-in law Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin (1855–1922)—the extended Bergevin family sustained a close kin network over nearly forty years. Separated by time, distance, and language, the participants in this correspondence, most of whom were women who never met face to face, developed and practiced a shared family narrative of virtual unity and eventual reunion.

### ***Communication Studies and Family Identity***

Kin keeping consists of communicating to sustain the connections among households; the study of the family identity of kin network takes us even further into family-communication studies, to family storytelling. Family research no longer espouses A. P. Bochner's 1970s definition of the monolithic family as a "naturally occurring phenomenon characterized by interpersonal communication."<sup>6</sup> Family structure and communication is social and historical, not spontaneous. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson called for inquiry into "the generation and reproduction of the family as a social and historical arrangement, in particular as a social organization constructed through differences in gender and generation."<sup>7</sup> Their extensive work in family communication analyses the gendered ways in which storytelling—narrative, performance, and reception—creates family structures and power relationships.<sup>8</sup> Selective repetition of family stories not only records family identity but also generates it.

Erving Goffman developed this principle more generally in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), arguing that all conversations are performances

5 Di Leonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays," p. 443.

6 Arthur P. Bochner, "Conceptual Frontiers in the Study of Communication in Families: An Introduction to the Literature," *Human Communication Research* vol. 2, no. 4 (1976), p. 382. Cited in Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson, "Family Storytelling as a Strategy of Social Control," in Dennis K. Mumby, ed., *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 1993), p. 55.

7 Langellier and Peterson, "Family Storytelling as a Strategy of Social Control," pp. 49–76.

8 Langellier and Peterson based their work in family communication on case studies principally from interviews and conversations with Franco-American women in Maine. Although ethnic specificity is not the focus of Langellier's work, we observe a great deal of congruence between her 2002 analysis of women's role in these storytelling communities and that of the women in the Bergevin correspondence over a century earlier. See *ibid.*; also Kristin M. Langellier, "Performing Family Stories, Forming Cultural Identity: Franco American Mémère Stories," *Communication Studies* vol. 53 (2002), pp. 56–73; Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

and that the appearance of a coherent individual identity is an example of a story rendered true by repetition. Goffman proposed that context rather than internal constants creates communication, and he employs theatre metaphors to explain the feedback loop that flows constantly between speaker (performer) and interlocutor (audience).<sup>9</sup> His performance metaphor transposes easily to a metaphor of authorship for explaining the same structures in kin work and correspondence. With each letter, the kin keeper does not merely pass on factual information but also interprets the disparate branches of a family to each other to create a unified family narrative, in the process performing not only themselves, but also the entire family identity.

Research on kin work, family communication, and the social construction of self has focused on people alive today. A family correspondence allows us explore many of the same questions in the past. Because the letter exists both as a physical object, written by a gendered individual and situated in time and space, and also as a textual object, a form of recorded conversation, it enables us to examine “the generation and reproduction of the family as a social and historical arrangement”<sup>10</sup> in ways similar to those Langellier and Peterson studied. Correspondence analysis can thus reveal both the mechanisms of kin keeping that allowed an extended family to persist and the construction of a specific familial identity through the storytelling acts of the letters themselves.

This paper looks at three interwoven ways in which the authors of the Bergevin correspondence engage in kin work. We examine how the Bergevin letters are typical of family correspondences in their use of explicitly codified and articulated practices of reading, writing, and rereading (what Cécile Dauphin calls the “pacte épistolaire”).<sup>11</sup> We suggest how we might read their textual content through the lens of family storytelling.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we analyse examples of the explicit transmission of epistolary (kin-keeping) responsibilities to the next generation of kin keepers.

9 “A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location ... [I]t is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.” Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 252–253.

10 Langellier and Peterson, “Family Storytelling as a Strategy of Social Control,” p. 55.

11 Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat, and Pouban, *Ces bonnes lettres*, p. 131.

12 Langellier and Peterson’s definition of family storytelling emphasizes the authorial, creative aspect. Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, “Narrative Performance Theory: Telling Stories, Doing Family,” in Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter, eds., *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 99. Their definition, in particular the idea that (family, social) meaning is not absolute but rather emerges through narrative, has echoes of Goffman’s frame analysis. The family story as a moment is “keyed”—its content is transformed from the literal telling of an event happening to an individual to the ritual retelling of that event in a context where the telling itself is an affirmation not of new information but of shared knowledge. In the case of the Bergevin letters, they both narrate instances of family storytelling in real time in a group context and inscribe distant relations into the same circle of interlocutors by retelling the moment in a letter. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 45.

*Immigrant Letters and Family Correspondence*

Research in immigrant communication in English and French has recently expanded beyond literal readings of letters as factual historical sources. *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (2006), edited by Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber and Suzanne Sinke, brings together new and established scholars in the field of real-world epistolary texts, with all its accompanying challenges of preservation, access, and incompleteness.<sup>13</sup> Many of the topics are relevant to a historical analysis of kin keeping, including essays on discourse analysis (Gerber on silences and deceptions) and reception practice (Daiva Markelis on the public reading and rereading of letters from immigrants to home). Although none of the book's essays directly investigate gender or correspondence as a network (both key elements to any discussion of kin keeping), Markelis indicates that affirming the solidarity of the separated, extended family is the central reason for writing letters in her group.<sup>14</sup>

Limitations of the archival record help explain the scarcity of research on networks or gender in immigrant letters. Most archives of immigrant letters, as well as of correspondence more generally, consist predominantly of letters by male authors, and include only one side of the conversation. Does the preponderance of male voices in these archives accurately reflect the proportion of male letter-writers in life? Did preservation practices privilege writings by men? Is the proportion of female authors in archives of immigrant letters consistent with that of domestic correspondence?<sup>15</sup>

About immigrant letters specifically, Elliott, Gerber, and Sinke observe: "Women, illiterates, children, and those who wish for whatever reason not to maintain contact with their homelands are underrepresented in the corpus of immigrant letters. They are often spoken for, if spoken for at all, by others who do engage in writing."<sup>16</sup> Although women authors are generally much more common

13 Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). See in particular chapters by Gerber, Hanna, Fitzpatrick, Kamphoefner, Helbich, Markelis, and Vargas. Major studies by authors in this collection include Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Johannes Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., trans. Susan Carter Vogel, *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2008); and David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

14 Daiva Markelis, "'Every Person Like a Letter': The Importance of Correspondence in Lithuanian Immigrant Life," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, annotated ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 113.

15 Cécile Dauphin estimates that in France, in the second half of the nineteenth century, personal correspondence comprised only ten per cent of total franked mail; assuming that women wrote very few business letters during this period, their overall proportion of the total, both domestically and internationally, would have been very small. Cécile Dauphin, "Pour une histoire de la correspondance familiale," *Romantisme* vol. 25 (1995), pp. 92-93.

16 Elliott et al., *Letters across Borders*, p. 4. See also Wolfgang Helbich and Walter D. Kamphoefner's discussion of the low percentage of letters by women in the Bochum collection relative to the number of women migrants from Germany, in their "How Representative Are Emigrant Letters? An Exploration of the German Case," in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across*

in family correspondences than in immigrant letter collections, their overall lack of representation in the document record makes the ephemeral kin work of immigrant women in the nineteenth century difficult to trace.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, might their statistical absence have led us to mistakenly extrapolate the gendered writing practices of one culture of immigrant letter-writers to another, or to all?<sup>18</sup>

Work by Yves Frenette and others would suggest, as does the Bergevin corpus, that in French-Canadian correspondence women letter-writers have a central role.<sup>19</sup> Frenette and Magda Fahrni work with the exchange of letters between a Franco-American mother and daughter in “‘Don’t I Long for Montreal’: l’identité hybride d’une jeune migrante franco-américaine pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale.” The corpus they analyse comprises almost exclusively women authors in a familial correspondence, but kin structure and maintenance are not their focus. They concentrate on the evolution of young Alma Drouin’s personal identity as a Franco-American, rather than the exchange of letters as a network or her (or her mother’s) roles as the caretakers and perpetrators of their family’s identity. At times they come tantalizingly close to overlapping with our topic—“La culture épistolaire acquise par Alma trouve son origine d’abord au foyer familial, sa mère étant elle-même une grande épistolière, puis au couvent, où chaque semaine elle devait pratiquer l’art de la correspondance en rédigeant une lettre.”<sup>20</sup>—but the generational and institutional transmission of kin keeping from mother to daughter in Catholic families, although observed, is unexplored. Frenette delves further into the epistolary network in a separate analysis of the same corpus, describing what can only be a set of kin-keeper letters: “Les deux femmes font constamment référence à des membres de la parenté,”<sup>21</sup> but attributes the motivation for this

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*Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 41–42.

- 17 Note that the two categories occasionally overlap. Studies of immigrant-letter collections that are also family correspondences include Jean Le Bihan, “Enquête sur une famille Bretonne émigrée au Canada (1903–1920),” *Journal of the Canadian Plains Research Center* 22 (1997), pp. 73–101; Yves Frenette, Bianca Gendreau, Gabriele Scardellato, and John Willis, “L’expérience migratoire et la création d’un espace épistolaire : une étude de cas,” in Andrée Courtemanche and Martin Pâquet, eds., *Prendre la route : l’expérience migratoire en Europe et en Amérique du Nord du XIV<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Hull : Éditions Vents d’Ouest, 2001), pp. 172–193; Mario Mimeault, *L’exode québécois : 1852–1925* (Québec : Septentrion, 2013).
- 18 Gerber acknowledges in passing the existence of variation between ethnic groups in David A. Gerber, “Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters: Personal Identity and Self-Presentation in Personal Correspondence,” *Journal of Social History* vol. 39, no. 2 (2005), pp. 315–330.
- 19 See Yves Frenette, “‘Dear Alma ... Dear Mother ...’: La correspondance d’une mère et d’une fille franco-américaines, 1912–1915,” in Manuela Martini and Philippe Rygiel, eds., *Genre et travail migrant : mondes atlantiques, XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris : Editions Publibook, 2009); Magda Fahrni and Yves Frenette, “‘Don’t I Long for Montreal’: l’identité hybride d’une jeune migrante franco-américaine pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* vol. 41 (2008), pp. 75–98; and Le Bihan, “Enquête sur une famille Bretonne émigrée au Canada.” The Bennedsen correspondence analysed by Frenette and Scardellato is tantalizing because, while the focus of their work is Bennedsen himself, their description of the shift in correspondents to the wives and then children of the initial group suggests a gendered kin-keeping practice in action. See Frenette et al., “L’expérience migratoire et la création d’un espace épistolaire,” p. 181.
- 20 Fahrni and Frenette, “‘Don’t I Long for Montreal,’” p. 96.
- 21 Frenette, “‘Dear Alma ... Dear Mother,’” p. 155.



voluminous familial information to the “histoire conversationnelle,” which in this corpus, like the epistolary act, is principally the domain of women.<sup>22</sup>

Several of the essays from *Des identités en mutation : de l'Ancien au Nouveau Monde* (2002), edited by Danielle Forget and France Martineau, analyse letters by eighteenth-century Franco-American women, but its focus is resolutely individual, reading letters for insight into the evolving internal identities of the authors. A notable exception is Bruneton-Governatori and Moreau's piece on immigrant letters to home towns in the French department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, which, while centring on marks of acculturation, also analyses old- and new-world community networks maintained through correspondence.

Many of the essays in *Envoyer et recevoir : lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones* (2006), edited by Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, focus on immigrant correspondence within the francophone context.<sup>23</sup> In its most directly pertinent essay, Mario Mimeault presents the Lamontagne family correspondence of over a thousand letters over 60 years, which is also the subject of Mimeault's influential *L'exode québécois : 1852-1925* (2013).<sup>24</sup> Mimeault's essay in *Envoyer et recevoir* presents Emma Lamontagne-Vachon as the central figure of a vast “réseau épistolaire,” whose principal purpose was to “entretenir, au-delà de la séparation, les liens affectifs, fraternels et parentaux entre les membres de la famille dans le but non seulement d'échanger des renseignements, mais aussi de renforcer la solidarité du clan.”<sup>25</sup> In *L'exode québécois*, however, the father takes front stage as the linchpin of the correspondence network, not Emma. In both cases, despite his initial emphasis on the existence of a “réseau épistolaire,” Mimeault frequently takes a literal approach to Emma's codified complaints, highlighting her apparent unhappiness and her relationship with her father in an attempt to “décoder ses motivations les plus intimes.” In the process, he prioritizes her role as a daughter over her role as an epistolary node for her siblings and parents.<sup>26</sup> The result is that while Mimeault's analysis systematically notes the existence of a kin network, it turns aside from analysing its structure

22 Frenette, “Dear Alma ... Dear Mother,” p. 150.

23 Notable essays include “Langue et identité dans le Québec du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle : une écriture triangulaire,” by France Martineau and Annie Avard, who examine a three-way correspondence between a father, mother, and son when the father goes to the mines of Colorado in 1880; their focus is on the generational representation of family, language, and religion in the letters, whose authors are 60, 40, and 20 years old respectively. Also of note is John Willis's article “‘De votre chère soeur qui ne vous oublie jamais’: A Postal Perspective on French-Canadian Migration in North America,” in which he directly links kin networks and migration networks. Willis analyses letter-writing as an information vector leading to subsequent migrations, rather than as an end in itself or a means of perpetuating a familial identity. Hernan Otero's essay “Lettres à Léon : À propos des continuités et des ruptures des immigrants français en Argentine,” is intriguing, but its focus is on information content gleaned from the correspondence, rather than on the family labour roles and dynamics reflected in the letter exchange itself. Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, *Envoyer et recevoir : lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones* (Québec : Presses Université Laval, 2006).

24 Mimeault, *L'exode québécois : 1852-1925*.

25 Mario Mimeault, “‘Cher père, écrivez-moi, j'ai tant besoin d'encouragements dans mes troubles’ : Emma Lamontagne-Vachon, épistolière,” in Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, eds., *Envoyer et recevoir : lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones* (Québec : Presses Université Laval, 2006), pp. 143–74.

26 Mimeault, “Cher père, écrivez-moi,” p. 158.

and function, preferring instead to pursue the inner, individual motivations of the authors in the context of migration.

Outside the United States, *Ces bonnes lettres : une correspondance familiale au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* by Cécile Dauphin, Pierrette Lebrun-Pézerat, and Danièle Poublan closely explores a French family correspondence with a sizable proportion of women authors. Their study's corpus is not an example of immigrant letters, but the family is none the less separated, spread across several regions of France. They develop the concept of an epistolary contract, or "pacte épistolaire," referring to the entire panoply of implicit and explicit conventions at work between the letter-writer and the recipient(s). These conventions include attempts to bridge the distance through simulated presence, remarks about the pleasure and difficulty of communication, the expectation of a response, and comments on the timing and reception of the previous exchange.<sup>27</sup> This interconnected system of mutual obligation maps quite well onto the sociological definition of kin work.

In the book's third section, "Rituel," Dauphin and Poublan explore multi-author letters and the construction and function of the familial epistolary network (a precursor to their kin-work and network analysis of correspondence).<sup>28</sup> In their corpus, families designated letter-writers (usually women), and 85 per cent of the letters included some form of request for a service or to pass on a message, both concrete indicators of a network function. The authors' conclusion comes very close to analysing correspondence as kin work by kin keepers: "Les correspondants s'effacent derrière un groupe qui leur délègue la tâche d'écrire, derrière une entité qu'ils construisent dans la mesure où ils obéissent à ses règles."<sup>29</sup>

## The Bergevin Corpus

### *The Letters (1880—1909)*

The Bergevin correspondence includes several generations and numerous authors within one extended family. Four Bergevin brothers immigrated to the Walla Walla valley in south-eastern Washington state from St. Timothée, Beauharnois in the 1850s and 1860s, and settled in a *Métis* 'Frenchtown' community scattered along approximately seven miles of the Walla Walla River and nearby creeks. Like French Prairie in the Willamette valley of Oregon, Walla Walla's Frenchtown was established by former French-Canadian employees and their indigenous wives near an old fur-trade fort (Fort Nez Percé, later called Fort Walla Walla). By 1847, the community included over 50 families and cabins.<sup>30</sup> Descendants live in the

<sup>27</sup> Dauphin et al., *Ces bonnes lettres*, pp. 131-140.

<sup>28</sup> Dauphin et al., *Ces bonnes lettres*, p. 160-190.

<sup>29</sup> Dauphin et al., *Ces bonnes lettres*, p. 179. See also Françoise Noël for a similar study in Canada, albeit one based on multiple, smaller letter series, in *Family Life and Sociability in Upper and Lower Canada, 1780-1870: A View from Diaries and Family Correspondence* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), pp. 269-272.

<sup>30</sup> Sam Pambrun, "History of Frenchtown: Remarks Presented by Sam Pambrun as Part of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Observances of the Battle of Frenchtown at Frenchtown Hall in Lowden, Washington on December 10, 2005," Frenchtown Historical Site, 2016 <<http://www.frenchtownwa.org/frenchtown/>> (accessed July 30, 2017).



valley today, although their families stopped speaking French nearly 100 years ago.

The portion of the Bergevin collection that is the focus of this paper consists of nearly 140 letters in French that family members in Quebec sent to Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin and Damase Bergevin in Walla Walla between 1880 and 1909.<sup>31</sup> None of the letters written by Mary Parmelia in return were preserved. Seventy-seven letters in the collection were written by Sister Marie Augustin of the Sœurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et Marie (SNJM).<sup>32</sup> These documents, articulate and beautifully written, played a significant role in motivating the family to preserve the collection. The remaining letters include documents by at least twenty authors, many of whom were only marginally literate and who simultaneously wrote on behalf of other family members (what Dauphin and Poublan call “lettres dictées”).<sup>33</sup> Fourteen of the twenty authors were women, including Sister’s letters, they wrote over 80 per cent of the missives.

The collection is exceptional; while the French-Canadian diaspora in nineteenth-century North America penned many thousands of letters, few remain.<sup>34</sup> Letters in languages other than English are particularly vulnerable, because English-speaking descendants often discard documents they cannot read. The shift between languages can be very quick; in the case of the Bergevin letters, the original recipients in Walla Walla were almost all either francophone but non-literate in French or first-generation anglophone, literate only in English. Within a generation, the French-language text became an artefact to collect rather than a text to read.<sup>35</sup> The family was aware of this transition; at the point of donating their correspondence to the archives, members repeatedly talked about how many times someone had nearly discarded the collection because they could not read French.

### Historical Correspondence: Opportunities and Obstacles

Separation as the defining trait of a kin keeper’s position corresponds exactly to the Bergevin corpus. In this specific historical context, separation by migration reduced the family and community communication to a single path, offering us a rich opportunity. Because they had no other form of contact (no telephone, no

31 These numbers are necessarily approximate because we cannot know how many letters the fragments represent. A parallel group of letters written in English by Mary Parmelia’s siblings during the same time period was also consulted, but is not the focus of this study.

32 The congregation of Les Sœurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et Marie (Sisters of the Holy Names) was founded in 1843 in Longueuil, across the St Lawrence River from Montreal, and dedicated to the education of girls and young women. Sister Marie Augustin, SNJM, née Victoire Bergevin 1831-1899, and called ‘Sister’ by the family, joined as a postulant in 1851, and first went to the United States in 1867. Between 1867 and 1899, she helped found SNJM schools for girls in New York, Florida, California, and Ontario. Several of the schools where she was mother superior exist today. These schools include the Academy of the Holy Names in Albany, NY; the Academy of the Holy Names in Tampa, FL; and Ramona Convent Secondary School in Alhambra, CA. Despite a lengthy U.S. career, Sister’s superiors never permitted her to visit her brothers in Walla Walla.

33 Dauphin et al., *Ces bonnes lettres*, p. 164.

34 See the discussion by Yves Roby in the preface to Frenette et al., *Envoyer et recevoir*, p. ix.

35 The transition from text to artefact is evident in the fact that in the mid-twentieth century the collection was arbitrarily divided into four parts to ensure that each of four siblings had a representative share. These subsets were nearly lost and then reunited in a series of dramatic turns; the pages of the French-language letters had in many cases been separated.

actual physical visits, no touch), correspondents had to articulate everything they wished to communicate in words. And because of the already-long separation, they also frequently felt obliged to explain the context, where a closer communication network might have been more elliptical.

At the same time, distinct challenges face a correspondence-based investigation, and the Bergevin corpus is no exception. First, the archive rarely includes more than one side of an exchange. We have none of the letters written by Mary Parmelia; we only have those letters she received in Walla Walla. This fact risks minimizing the role of the missing author behind the excitement of those texts preserved. If we shift our analysis of the corpus away from literary authorship toward kin work as another kind of authorship, it becomes evident that Mary Parmelia is a second key to this network and essential to our understanding of this kin group.

Second, we can never be sure of the true extent of the correspondence. Families edit collections. They may discard letters to hide sensitive information, or save only those they deem in some way interesting or significant. As David Gerber notes:

In most cases, we may never know whether these archived collections that historians investigate are complete or a fraction of the total exchange of correspondence between the parties, because letters that would prove embarrassing or reveal intimate and private matters have been removed. We may never know how many complete exchanges of correspondence have been lost or destroyed, or are still in private hands. Each letter collection is, therefore, a part of a universe of documents, the size and nature of which can never really be known.<sup>36</sup>

Faced with these ambiguous gaps in the documentary record, we must develop a different model for reading correspondence, emphasizing less the existing document (the preserved letter) and more the exchange. This shift requires us to mine information from the negative space, borrowing a visual-arts term that describes the area around the subject of an image, the ‘not-subject’ area. For our work, this concept refers to information about missing letters that we may infer from the text of the existing documents. Such information can be directly present, in the form of a response that specifies a query or information in the original letter: “Chers enfants, vous dites que vous arrêterez à Schenectady en allant au Canada.”<sup>37</sup> It may also be decipherable only on a larger scale; for example, the dates and rhythm of responses may suggest the rhythm and perhaps motivation (holiday, family event, and so on) of Mary Parmelia’s letters. In this manner we may analyse the work of both of the Bergevins’ two main kin keepers—the

36 Gerber, “Epistolary Masquerades,” p. 142. For a more detailed account of the many ways in which the path from item to archive can be perilous and winding, see Ariane Bruneton-Governatori, “L’avènement d’une source privée : lettres et correspondances d’émigrés pyrénéens,” in Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, eds., *Envoyer et recevoir : lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones* (Québec : Presses Université Laval, 2006), pp. 19–38.

37 WCNA, J. Frank Munns Papers, WCMss 348, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, April 18, 1887.

itinerant Sister Marie Augustin ('Sister') and Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin in Walla Walla—even without the latter's letters.

### *A Family Separated*

Nine siblings<sup>38</sup>, five girls, and four boys, grew up in St-Timothée, Quebec, approximately 60 kilometres south of Montréal on the St Lawrence River. The oldest sibling, Joseph, was born in 1821; the youngest, Damase, in 1840 (see appendices I and II for genealogies). All four brothers—Joseph, Louis, Clément, and Damase—migrated from Quebec to the Walla Walla Valley, in what is now southeastern Washington state, in two stages, the older two going by way of the California Gold Rush in 1849 and then making their way north, and the younger two traveling overland in 1863. Four sisters—Catherine (born 1822), Marie (1826), Elmire (1829), and Clémence (1831) married and stayed in Quebec; Victoire (Sr. Marie Augustin, 1833) became a nun.

In Walla Walla, only two of the brothers married. The oldest, Joseph, died a bachelor in 1873. The second, Louis (born 1823), married Celina Forest in 1864, and the couple had four children before divorcing in 1872.<sup>39</sup> Louis and Celina died within a month of each other in 1874, leaving the children in the charge of their two remaining uncles, Clément (born 1838, whom the family called 'Langevin') and Damase ('Beldame'). In 1881, Damase Bergevin married Mary Parmelia Allard, who was also the niece of his former sister-in-law, Celina Forest. He was 41, and she was 27; they are the recipients of all the collection's letters.

Literary and material obstacles made contact among the brothers in Walla Walla and their immediate family in Quebec extremely infrequent before the 1881 marriage of Damase and Mary Parmelia. Literacy was gendered in this family: no evidence shows that any of the brothers or their parents were literate, but all of the sisters could read and write, albeit with some difficulty.<sup>40</sup> We do not know if this split was unusual at the level of the individual family; in Quebec, female literacy slightly exceeded male literacy between 1860 and 1900.<sup>41</sup> Although Quebec as a whole was significantly less literate than its European or American counterparts in the nineteenth century, the gap between men and women was much lower, and in the second half of the century actually inverted, with slightly more women than men either literate (able to read and write) or semi-literate (able to read only). In

<sup>38</sup> This number does not include two children who died in infancy.

<sup>39</sup> Though typically rare among French Canadians, divorce appears to have been slightly more common in the Walla Walla valley, perhaps because of the blended culture of Catholic Cayuse Métis families, some of whom retained Indigenous attitudes towards the acceptability of divorce. In the case of Celina Forest Bergevin, who was not Métis, the court granted her divorce on the grounds of neglect and abuse.

<sup>40</sup> Aside from Sister, everything we know about the schooling of the Bergevin siblings we deduce from the text of the letters themselves. St Timothée had a school as early as 1820, although instruction for girls may not have been available until at least 1831. In 1848, the Sœurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et de Marie (1843) took over the convent school in St Timothée; Sister would have been 15 at that point. Alice Roussel, *La belle histoire de St-Timothée 1829-1979* (Cap-de-la-Madelaine, Que.: Comité de l'Album-Souvenir, 1979), p. 120. Sister joined this same congregation as a postulant in Longueuil in 1851.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Verrette, *L'alphabétisation au Québec, 1660-1900 : en marche vers la modernité culturelle* (Québec: Les éditions du Septentrion, 2002), p. 112.

contrast, in early modern England, France, and New England, men were nearly twice as likely to be literate as women.<sup>42</sup>

There were also many material obstacles to correspondence. The Bergevin brothers lived eight miles from Walla Walla, and exercised a range of mobile occupations, including mule-packing, logging, and mining. The name of one older brother appears on one of the few surviving lists of letters foreign and domestic in the *Walla Walla Statesman* on February 7, 1863, about six months before the two younger brothers arrived in Walla Walla. The first letter in the collection, from Sister on July 24, 1880, refers to at least three additional exchanges between 1874 and 1880 (note that Joseph Bergevin died in 1873 and Louis in 1874; only the two younger brothers remained in Walla Walla for this period), of which no material trace remains.<sup>43</sup> Marginal annotations in Sister's letters indicate that her letters were sometimes returned to sender: "J'ai votre lettre de Décembre dernier. J'aurais répondu plus vite, mais c'est décourageant, mes lettres me reviennent presque toujours. Je ne sais pas si vous êtes connus dans cette place, ou si vous n'allez jamais à l'office."<sup>44</sup>

The last eight miles from Walla Walla to Frenchtown and the mobile occupations of the brothers may well have wreaked more havoc with family letters than the three thousand miles from Quebec or Florida to the Walla Walla Post Office. In the 1860s, postal service throughout the Pacific Northwest improved in speed and reliability and dropped in price. The Montana and Idaho gold rushes shaped mail service to Walla Walla, then the largest town in Washington Territory and the transportation and supply hub for the inland northwest.<sup>45</sup> The inland mail route went from Salt Lake City, Utah, through Boise, Idaho, to Walla Walla, and then down the Columbia River to the Dalles in Oregon. Mail circulated via private stagecoach expresses under contract to the U.S. postmaster-general.<sup>46</sup> Although service was still at times unreliable, postage across the continent dropped from ten cents per half-ounce letter in 1855-63 to three cents for 1863-83.<sup>47</sup>

42 Allan Greer, "The Pattern of Literacy in Quebec, 1745-1899," *Histoire sociale / Social History* vol. 11 (1978), p. 326.

43 Only a partial run of the *Walla Walla Statesman* and the *Walla Walla Union*, the two local newspapers for the 1860s-1880s, exists, but their published letter lists tell us of at least one other exchange, in the form of a letter to Joseph Bergevin in 1863, approximately six months before the two younger brothers arrived in Walla Walla. Letters from Sister refer to at least three exchanges between 1874 and 1880 (note that Joseph Bergevin died in 1873 and Louis in 1874; only the two younger brothers remain in Walla Walla for this period), of which no material trace remains.

44 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_002r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Aug. 13, 1883.

45 Carlos A. Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 133.

46 In 1864, Ben Holladay was hired to run a tri-weekly mail service from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Walla Walla. By 1867, this service ran daily. LeRoy Reuben Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869: Promoter of Settlement, Precursor of Railroads* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), p. 280. For statistics on mail service to the U.S. west prior to the 1860s, see Marianne Babal, "A Distant Shore," in John Willis, ed., *More Than Words: Readings in Transport, Communication and the History of Postal Communication* (Gatineau, Que.: Canadian Museum of Civilization/Musée Canadien des Civilisations, 2007), p. 321-334.

47 Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869*, p. 273.

*Re-establishing kin ties*

The oldest document in the Bergevin archive dates from July 24, 1880. Only three letters precede Damase and Mary Parmelia's marriage in July 1881, all three from Sister to brothers Damase and Clément Bergevin: an incomplete letter dated July 24, 1880, another dated December 18, 1880, and one more from St Mary's Academy in Portland on June 13, 1881, concerning the return of Damase's orphan niece Elmira. Curiously, while the collection contains letters from Mary Parmelia's own (Allard) family after her marriage, it does not include any documents from her life before that event, even though her name appears in 1877 on the newspaper list of letters received, and that of her family six other times.

Although Mary Parmelia seems to have started saving family correspondence almost immediately, Damase's family in Quebec did not learn of their union for at least a year. This silence may have been due to illness—she had their first child only seven months later and was ill for some time afterwards. But other factors may have been in play. We know from the text of Sister's letters that a Christmas letter from Sister to Walla Walla in 1879 went missing entirely, either lost in the mail or not preserved. We also know that she received a letter from Damase and Clément in Key West, Florida, where she was posted from 1875 to 1882, sometime between July and December of 1880. Sister's 1880 Christmas letter was returned to her undelivered, and she wrote in the margin that she was resending it; we do not know precisely when it was received, or whether Damase and Mary Parmelia attempted to respond.

In 1882, after nearly a year and a half without news, Sister took a different approach. On April 19, she wrote to the mother superior of the Sisters of Providence in Walla Walla to inquire if her brothers still lived in the area: the post office having returned two of her letters undelivered. This 1882 missive appears to have been effective. Certainly, within a French-Canadian Catholic community, a mother superior's intervention would have carried a good deal of weight. She likely reproached Mary Parmelia for not fulfilling her (kin work) obligation to maintain family ties with her new relatives, with the result that at Christmas 1882 the newlyweds wrote to Sister and included a family portrait. Sister acknowledges its receipt in a letter of August 1883:

“J’ai votre lettre de Décembre dernier. J’aurais répondu plus vite, mais c’est décourageant, mes lettres me reviennent presque toujours. Je ne sais pas si vous êtes connus dans cette place, ou si vous n’allez jamais à l’office. Je suis heureuse du bonheur de Damase, d’après ce que je puis voir il a une petite femme tout-à-fait aimable. Puis la chère petite fille ! Combien j’aimerais à la voir, à lui faire mille carresses.”<sup>48</sup>

From this point forward, the correspondence expanded steadily for several years. After an initial exchange of letters, Sister and Mary Parmelia sent each other gifts in 1884 and 1885, both in summer and at Christmas, including a lock of hair

48 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_002r, S' Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Aug. 13, 1883.

from Damase.<sup>49</sup> Christmas 1884 sees a further expansion of the reestablished kin network with the inclusion of Damase's sisters in Montreal and Mary Parmelia's great-aunt Alise Forest Thibodeau, near Trois-Rivières. The responses indicate that each of these new attempts at contact contained pictures. But the process was fraught. The couple's first letter to Damase's sister Clémence (date unknown, plausibly 1884) disappeared en route; in 1886 she responds to the second with chagrin and explains that she never received the first. Nor was the process yet frequent. These early exchanges numbered only about one a year.

One extended event in 1893 transformed the correspondence and became a powerful symbol within it. Suffering from encroaching blindness, Damase in January 1893 headed to Montreal by train with 11-year-old Eléonie for medical treatment, hoping to save his sight. They spent six months in the province of Quebec, Damase in Montreal and Eleonie at Maplewood Convent in Sherbrooke, where her aunt (Sister) was mother superior. Nearly a third of the letters to Walla Walla from Sister and the Montreal family date from this period, 1893–1895. Most letters following this stay refer to it in some way, either directly or by recounting a recent conversation about the good times they had when Uncle Beldame (Damase) came to town. Mary Parmelia never met her correspondents in Montreal, but Damase's return there after 29 years reinforced the ties tenuously re-established by correspondence.

### ***Kinkeepers as Bilingual Network Nodes***

A social network consists of a set of actors (or nodes) and the relations (ties or edges) between these actors.<sup>50</sup> The correspondence shows that the Bergevin kin network consisted of multiple extended families connected through kinkeepers, rather than one overarching unit. The two most important nodes of the transcontinental Bergevin family kin network were Mary Parmelia, representing the family in Walla Walla, and Sister, representing the family in Montreal (although for most of this period, Sister's contact with Montreal family members was also epistolary). Yet several of the Montreal sister families had their own kin keepers, usually a daughter, who served as the relay point for family information, composing letters for a group unable to write for itself.<sup>51</sup> The names of such node individuals appear with underlining in the genealogies in appendices I and II.

Sister took these responsibilities very seriously. The node function of the kin keeper as a communication hub is explicit in her letters—in the information she passes on, in the letters from Walla Walla that she forwards to Montreal, and in her

49 The collection contains no references to gift exchange between the Walla Walla group and the family in Quebec, although frequent references to the exchange of portraits exist. Sister does exchange gifts with Damase's family, sometimes at Christmas. It is not clear whether the American holiday custom or the rule of reciprocity (or both) dictates this practice. Sister systematically sent a big letter at Christmas/New Year's, perhaps partly because her congregation's rules did not allow her to write whenever she liked. Note that when Sister herself was mother superior at a school, she allowed herself to write somewhat more frequently.

50 Nancy Katz, David Lazer, Holly Arrow, and Noshir Contractor, "Network Theory and Small Groups," *Small Group Research* vol. 35 (2004), pp. 307–32.

51 Clémence Bergevin Gobeil had no daughters, and her eldest son, Joseph, periodically writes on behalf of their family.



accounts of conversations that took place during her semi-annual return visits. In 1884 she wrote from Schenectady, NY :

Vous pouvez certainement m'envoyer vos portraits, et je les ferai parvenir de suite à mes Soeurs. Ne vous fatiguez pas pour les écrire; je leur passe toujours tout ce que vous m'envoyez ...] Je suis allée au Canada au mois de Juin. J'ai vu mes quatre Soeurs, elles étaient bien, seulement je les trouve vieilles, surtout Besote, Hyacinthe n'est pas bien, il souffre toujours des douleurs d'estomac; Léose a trois 4 charmants petits enfants, deux filles et deux garçons, la plus vieille Eléonie a fait sa première Communion l'année dernière, elle est belle et douce comme un Ange. [this summary of the state of the family continues for nearly four pages.]<sup>52</sup>

Although her prolific and dedicated correspondence with a broad network (her husband's relatives in Quebec, her own extended family in the U.S. west, and numerous friends and neighbours) demonstrates Mary Parmelia's significance as the connecting node, we can deduce some of the obstacles she had to overcome to fulfill this obligation. The letters clearly indicate that both Mary Parmelia and Sister were bilingual, acting as intermediaries for unilingual relations. But where Sister indicates that she is comfortable in either language, "Il vous est peut-être difficile de m'écrire en français ; well then, write in english, it makes no difference to me. I like it just as well,"<sup>53</sup> several passages suggest that when it came time for Mary Parmelia to write, she preferred English. In 1888, Sister admonishes her to write in French to Montreal: "Ma chère Parmélia, écris donc en français à mes Sœurs et non en anglais, car Léose ne lit pas l'anglais."<sup>54</sup> Mary Parmelia's other correspondents in the region (including her siblings) always wrote to her in English, with only the occasional French word, although spoken French was in use in Frenchtown at least through the Great War. Regardless of whether English was Mary Parmelia's preferred written language, hers and Sister's bilingualism allowed them to function as representatives and intermediaries (nodes) for larger, monolingual groups. Without their ability to exercise the kin keeping function in both languages, the family rupture caused by the western migration of the four brothers almost certainly would have been permanent.

### ***Performing the Family: Letter-writing and Family Gatherings***

Beyond the context of Sister's annual visits, many of the letters suggest that these same women also 'kept kin' face to face, coordinating resources and maintaining contact across the extended Montreal family. Elmiere's family (where daughter Léose/Liliose was the kin keeper) had a grocery store in the city, while the other three sisters lived along the south bank of the St Lawrence, in Châteauguay, Sainte-Martine, and Valleyfield. Letters captured the four sisters' frequent visits to

<sup>52</sup> WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_003r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 14, 1884.

<sup>53</sup> WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_007r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Clément Bergevin, Jul. 24, 1880.

<sup>54</sup> WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_049r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 21, 1888.

each other for Sister or Walla Walla relatives, along the lines of Sherry Olsen and Patricia Thornton's observations about women's central role in Montreal social networks for this period in *Peopling of the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900* (2011).<sup>55</sup> Multiple passages reveal the symbiotic relationship between actual visits and conversations among family members in Montreal and the virtual visits and conversations of the letters to Walla Walla, what Frenette calls the "histoire conversationnelle."<sup>56</sup> The inclusion of the context and inspiration for the letter, rooted in a family gathering, shows Damase and Mary Parmelia that they continue to be present in the real-time thoughts and conversations of the family in Montreal, as for example when Sister tells of a visit from sisters Marie and Elmire : "[elles] sont venues me voir Dimanche dernier. Nous avons parlé de vous tous. Comme il fait bon de parler de nos chers frères, de notre chère petite Soeur Parmelia que nous aimerions tant à connaître de parler aussi des enfants de notre pauvre frère Louis, que nous ne verrons probablement jamais ici-bas, mais que nous espérons rencontrer au Ciel!"<sup>57</sup>

This instance of the Walla Walla Bergevins' presence-despite-absence illustrates the central narrative of their extended family identity. The "story" in this case is the idea that whenever the family is together, they narrate to each other that they are also apart. The passage encapsulates Langellier and Peterson's definition of family storytelling; in her letter, Sister specifies both the performance (the conversation about separation) and the reception (the feelings it generated) of this family trope. As a result, the story does double duty as a generator of coherent family identity, both in its initial telling with Marie and Elmire, and then again in its epistolary retelling.

For most of the family, not subject to the isolation imposed by Sister's profession, writing letters and reading them was a communal activity. Many of the letters from Montreal were composed during or immediately after a family gathering.<sup>58</sup> The group writing inscribes the absent members into the familial space, rendering them present and synchronous. It also connects letter-writing to family gatherings, both key aspects of kin keeping, insofar as letters narrate the gathering in real time and assure recipients that the list of family members continues to include them. The descriptions are thus inherently contradictory:

55 Although these scholars used a patronymic sampling of 12 families, they hypothesize a matronymic sample as potentially more useful for studying the extended family, since "women seem to have played the greater role in grooming the relationships, pruning the family tree, and transmitting the loyalties to language and religious faith." Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton, *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), p. 348.

56 Fahrni and Frenette speak of "histoire conversationnelle" to emphasize the situation of multiple voices in conversation transitioning back and forth between an epistolary space and face-to-face interaction. "Nous sommes donc en présence d'une histoire conversationnelle à plusieurs voix, qui s'expriment à la fois à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de l'espace épistolaire. À l'occasion, un membre du réseau épistolaire est exclu pour garder un secret." "Don't I Long for Montreal," p. 96.

57 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_047r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, May 5, 1895.

58 See Dauphin et al., *Ces bonnes lettres*, for a detailed exploration of all the possible variations of this kind of communal letter, what they call a "lettre multiple"; pp. 163-166.

first, how good it is to be all together, and then, how terrible it is to not all be together, because you are absent.<sup>59</sup>

Despite her solitary writing circumstances, Sister's missives clearly articulate the assumption that communal letters were the norm:

Mon chère frère et ma chère soeur, Read this letter you two alone... Hyacinthe et Elmire ont abandonné leur petite grocerie. Ils n'ont plus rien ... C'est un secret, il ne voudrait pour beaucoup faire connaître leur pauvreté... C'est Augustine qui m'a écrit dernièrement et elle m'a tout raconté, je suppose qu'elle n'a montré sa lettre à personne.<sup>60</sup>

The opening statement suggests that the normal practice upon receiving a letter would be to open it and read it aloud to everyone present. But because she includes private information, Sister starts with the injunction to read it "you two alone"—clearly an exceptional practice, one that must be specified at the outset. She further specifies that she is passing on private information from her grandniece Augustine (Elmire's granddaughter). According to Frenette: "Les scripteurs sont fort conscients de la diffusion qu'auront leurs lettres, d'où une autocensure parfois. Dans cet échange épistolaire, l'oral et l'écrit, le public et le privé, se chevauchent."<sup>61</sup> Frenette identifies letter-sharing as a practice that affects both recipients and authors, who must take into account that their words will be shared—as Sister does above with her injunction to "read this you two alone." She is not censoring her letter so much as prescribing its distribution. This chain of information, from Augustine to Sister to Mary Parmelia and Damase, demonstrates the controlled and complex overlap between public and private and oral and written information in this family.

### *Sister's Reading and Writing Practices as Performance*

Prescribing the public and private boundaries of a letter's reception exemplifies a more general trait of the epistolary form, which attempts to define its own performance through carefully codified practices of reading, rereading, and responding—Cécile Dauphin's "pacte épistolaire." Sister's letters regularly narrate her own reading practice for letters she receives. She tells of the pleasure of receiving them, citing her practice of rereading them multiple times.<sup>62</sup> This

59 Many of Sister's letters also explicitly perform this function, but usually recounting a visit well after the fact. Her Christmas letter to Walla Walla, written from Albany, New York, in December, 1888, recounts a visit to Montreal two months earlier: "Nous étions ensemble dans ma dernière visite au Canada, Marie, Elmire, Clémence, Victoire, Clémence la fille aînée de notre chère Sœur Besote puis Arzélie sa fille qui est mariée et demeure à Montréal. Mais hélas ! il y avait un grand vide, chère Maman n'était pas là, puis Langevin et Damase ne sont jamais du nombre de ceux qui viennent me rencontrer." WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_098, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 23, 1888.

60 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_059r, S' Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Sept. 6, 1898.

61 Yves Frenette, "Introduction," in Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, *Envoyer et recevoir : lettres et correspondances dans les diasporas francophones* (Québec : Presses Université Laval, 2006), p. 10.

62 WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_104v, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary

rereading intensifies the feeling of presence and familiarity the communication creates, transforming it into a form of virtual visit: "Tell your good father and mother that I received their interesting letters. I must read those letters three or four times; so pleasing they are to me. In fact, it is as if I were at Walla Walla, visiting you all."<sup>63</sup> Sister enacts this virtual-visit function in sending letters as well as in receiving them: "My New Year's letter is long, I wish you to read it now and then, it will be my visit to you all."<sup>64</sup>

The rereading practice described in these passages lends weight and authority to the letters' storytelling effect, serving as a continuous "retelling." Reappearing themes multiply through the rereading of each individual exchange. These themes do not in themselves resemble actual stories, only rarely narrating anecdotes or shared memories. Rather, Sister's letters to Mary Parmelia and Damase almost all contain these three elements: the importance and pleasure of exchanging letters and photos, the grief of separation, and the hope of reunion, if not on earth then in heaven. This narrative of the family is told and retold: once they were together, now they are apart, and, if they are faithful, they may yet be together again:

[Y]our letters are so sweet, so interesting, you cannot imagine with what joy I read them, and so many times. Dearest Belle Dame you say "I am lonesome for you and I come to spend the afternoon with you." If this could be realized, what a pleasure, what joy this visit would cause me. But we are so far from each other! so far, still, in thought I am always with you; for more than thousand times a day I whisper to the ear of Our Lord [sic] 'Mon Dieu, je vous en supplie, ouvrez les yeux de mon frère Belle Dame !!! Mais je ne devrais pas parler d'une infirmité qui jette un voile de deuil sur nos plus beaux jours, Dieu changera, plus tard, nos pleurs en joie. Nous nous reconnaitrons sur le rivage de la bienheureuse éternité.'<sup>65</sup>

Sister elides Mary Parmelia's intermediary role in this letter, "speaking" directly to Damase, who "says" to her in the present tense that he misses her and will come to visit (remember that Damase could not write; by 1894 he also could no longer see). The quoted passage within the letter suggests that Mary Parmelia, at least when writing to Sister, probably used English. But it also illustrates the strong oral component of this epistolary network. Orality is omnipresent, both in the reflexive language for describing their exchange and in the narrated content. Sister frequently refers to a letter as a "visite," or (like Mary Parmelia in the preceding quote) to writing a letter as speaking: "Quand vous m'écrivez, parlez-moi toujours comme vous le faites, j'aime tant vos lettres elles sont si fines. Tâchez de me comprendre, car je vous écris à la course. Ma pensée, quand je vous parle, va toujours plus vite que ma plume."<sup>66</sup> These rhetorical attempts at an imaginary

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Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 9, 1894.

63 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_055r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 12, 1896.

64 WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_106r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 18, 1893.

65 WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_104v, Sr. Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 19, 1894.

66 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_126r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary

conversation are often in the present tense, wilfully ignoring the asynchronous nature of correspondence in favour of an imaginary, real-time proximity.<sup>67</sup>

The contrast between the two quotes just above tells us that Mary Parmelia's kin-keeping function was dual in more ways than one. At times Sister's letters address Damase directly, as though speaking only to him, even though Mary Parmelia would have had to read aloud for him; at other times, the letters seem to address her personally, rather than the family or Damase through her.<sup>68</sup> In this respect Mary Parmelia is quite explicitly, and perhaps solely, the western "node" of the Bergevin network. Because Langevin and Damase were illiterate, she was doubly intermediary. She navigated between French and English and also wrote on behalf of those who could not—her young children and her husband and brother-in-law. It is not clear to what degree this was voluntary; Sister explicitly charged her with the role of kin keeper for the entire group when Langevin would not reply: "Puis mon cher Langevin, dites-moi donc, est-ce qu'il ne nous aime plus? ... Je lui écris, et je ne reçois jamais de réponse. Je sais qu'il ne sait pas écrire lui-même, mais quand il demande à Elmira de nous écrire, lui refuse-t-elle de le faire? Enfin, je ne sais que penser. Dans ce cas, ma chère Parmélia écris-moi pour lui aussi bien que pour toi; Damase et les aimables petits enfants."<sup>69</sup> Sister's frustration with Langevin's apparent refusal to answer her letters tells us about the rules of this epistolary network. While the Bergevins' kin keeping is gendered, sustaining the practice is more important to the participants than the gender of the kin keeper.<sup>70</sup> Langevin's celibacy and illiteracy are no excuse; although Sister's first thought was to turn to a niece as the *porte-plume*, she holds him fully accountable for finding a way to write to her; in the face of his silence, she again calls upon Mary Parmelia to take on the task.

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Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 29, 1896.

67 The idea that a letter should respect many of the same conventions of register and style as a conversation was a standard trope of nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals, particularly in France. For a good summary of work on this question in France, see Martha Hanna, "A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I," *American Historical Review* vol. 108 (2003), p. 1343. Epistolary manuals in Quebec took a similar stance, although we cannot say how much the Bergevin sisters may have known of them. Despite errors, their letters follow many of the codes of content of the personal letter quite systematically, beginning with inquiries after health and ending with the request to pass on their regards to others. For an overview of epistolary manuals in broad circulation in Quebec, see Manon Brunet, "Les traités d'art épistolaire au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle québécois : rhétorique et code social," in Benoît Melançon and Pierre Popovic, eds., *Les facultés des lettres : recherches récentes sur l'épistolaire français et québécois* (Montreal: Centre universitaire pour la sociopoétique de l'épistolaire et des correspondances, 1993), p. 45-72.

68 Frenette, Scardellato, and Willis mention this situation in the Bennedsen correspondence. C. Bennedsen's principal correspondent was his mother, but he addresses his letters to his father. Yves Frenette, Bianca Gendreau, Gabriele Scardellato, and John Willis, "L'expérience migratoire et la création d'un espace épistolaire : une étude de cas," in Andrée Courtemanche and Martin Pâquet, eds., *Prendre la route : l'expérience migratoire en Europe et en Amérique du Nord du XIV<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Hull, Que. : Éditions Vents d'Ouest, 2001), p. 180. This essay was reprinted in English: Yves Frenette and Gabrielle Scardellato, "The Immigrant Experience and the Creation of a Transatlantic Epistolary Space: A Case Study," in John Willis, ed., *More Than Words: Readings in Transport, Communication and the History of Postal Communication* (Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization/Musée Canadien des Civilisations, 2007), pp. 189-202.

69 WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_056r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Sept. 5, 1888.

70 In *Ces bonnes lettres*, Dauphin et al. observed the same phenomenon, pp. 178-179.

## Passing the Torch

### *From Mother to Daughter*

Mary Parmelia's kin keeping for her husband's family may not have been completely voluntary, but she appears to have taken on this role for her family of origin of her own free will. She exchanged regular letters in English with her own siblings across what is now Washington, Idaho, and Montana, and maintained sporadic contact in French with a maternal great-aunt, Alise Forest, in Bécancour, Quebec, across the St Lawrence from Trois-Rivières. This last example of contact is particularly revealing. Although only three letters in the archive come from her family in Quebec, they show that she carried on a long family tradition of contact with far-away relatives:

Pardonne a une vieille tante d'avoir été si negligente a repondre a ta lettre qui m'a fait tant de joie toi qui est si bonne de prendre la place de ta mère pour m'écrire moi qui aimais tant ses lettre quand même que j'ai été longtemps sans écrire ca ne veut pas dire que je vous ai oublié non je pense toujours a vous autres et je veux que nous nous écrivions souvent puisque nous sommes privés de nous voir nous allons faire exister la correspondance.<sup>71</sup>

This letter from Alise Forest dates from November 28, 1885, the first of three (the other two date from October 7, 1888, and December 22, 1889), and indicates that Mary Parmelia's mother, who died of uterine cancer on January 1, 1884, wrote regularly to her maternal aunt Alise, whom she would have known as a child before leaving Québec. Alise's letter furthermore tells us that Mary Parmelia succeeded her mother as kin keeper-correspondent; the two later letters make clear that Mary Parmelia took on this role not only in place of her mother, but also her grandfather, Joseph Forest, who immigrated from Quebec to Minnesota with his wife, Marguerite Pichez, and four children (including Mary Parmelia's mother Léocadie, then in her teens) in the 1850s, before settling in Walla Walla in the 1860s. Unlike the Bergevin brothers, Joseph Forest was literate, and he corresponded with his sister in Quebec: in October 1888, Alise complained to Mary Parmelia that her brother Joseph no longer replied to her letters.<sup>72</sup> Alise Forest's three letters to Mary Parmelia thus reference a family letter-writing practice now going back two generations, one which started between close relatives with shared memories of one another, then continued into the next generation despite the absence of face to face contact: "[T]u m'as l'air bien bonne tu me fait penser a ta mère tu as du naturel pour t'occuper de nous autres tu sais que tu nous fait un grand plaisir en nous écrivant et en nous donnant des nouvelles de toute la famille tes frères et soeurs et ton mari et de ton cher grandpère tu mets un baume sur mon coeur toutes les fois que tu m'écris."<sup>73</sup> Alise Forest's correspondance with Mary Parmelia both

71 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_084r, Alise Forest to Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin, Nov.28, 1885.

72 Further evidence that Joseph Forest was able to write—he was able to sign his daughter Léocadie's baptismal record in Bécancour on January 6, 1834.

73 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_085v, Alise Forest to Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin, Dec. 22, 1889.



emphasizes her epistolary inheritance and connects their exchange to an entire chain of lost letters from the Forest family's migration across the continent.

While we must infer Mary Parmelia's assumption of the kin-keeper role from the responses she received, we have more detailed, first-person information about the parallel transfer to Sister. Catherine LaBerge Bergevin (1801-1876 ; mother of the nine Bergevin siblings), died on May 22, 1876, and Sister explicitly situates herself as her mother's heir: "Je vous aime plus que vous ne pouvez vous l'imaginer car depuis la mort soudaine de ma vertueuse Mère, il semble que Dieu a fait passer dans mon cœur tout l'amour dont son cœur était rempli ! Ces souvenirs ne vieillissent pas ; voilà pourquoi je ne puis consentir à mettre dans l'oubli aucun de ceux qui me sont unis par les liens du sang."<sup>74</sup> Through her letters, Sister took on the role of sustaining memory not only by preserving contact, but also by attempting to organize family gatherings—the kin keeper's central task, according to di Leonardo.<sup>75</sup> She constantly inquired about the possibility of the Walla Walla Bergevins' visiting Canada and always referred to their absence in her narration of family gatherings that took place during her visits to Montreal.

Sister's most insistent efforts towards family reunion centred on the afterlife: "Au revoir ici-bas ou dans un monde meilleur. ne l'oubliez pas, il faut que vous veniez au ciel. Là Papa et Maman, nous attendent pour n'en plus jamais être séparés. Priez pour eux, ne les oublions pas dans nos prières. Mille baisers à tous, aux chers petits enfants mille caresses. J'attends vos portraits sous peu."<sup>76</sup> Sister's emphasis on religious practice ties in doubly with her understanding of the kin keeper as steward of family unity. Almost every letter articulates one or more forms of her wish for reunion—the "visit" of receiving a letter or a photograph portrait, an actual physical visit, or reunion in heaven. This rhetoric of reunion derives partly from their mother's grief at the family's separation. Many passages in the letters from both Sister and the Montreal sisters' families emphasize that Catherine LaBerge grieved the absence of her sons all the way up to her death.<sup>77</sup> This grief is a central theme in the letters, present in all references to the mother.

Rosenthal listed death on par with immigration among the disruptors that create the need for a kin keeper.<sup>78</sup> In the Bergevin letters, family anxieties often linked the separation of migration with the thought of death. To combat these two forces of separation, Sister takes on the charge of reuniting the family in the afterlife, constantly encouraging religious practice through her letters, with the single-minded goal of eternal reunion of the family unit: "Pour ma part, je suis

74 WCNA, J. Frank Munns Papers, WCMss 348, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, June 22, 1889.

75 Di Leonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays," pp. 440–453.

76 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_005, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 14, 1884.

77 For example: "Cette pauvre Mémère disait toujours, que ce n'étais pas juste de voir ses enfant, si éloigné, elle disait que c'était la, le grand bonheur d'une famille était de les voir tous réunies autour de leur vieux parents, mais malheureusement son rêve ne s'est jamais réaliser." WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_317r, Léose Poirier Rodrigue to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, April 1, [1888].

78 Rosenthal, "Kinkeeping in the Familial Division of Labor," pp. 965–974; Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat, and Pouban, *Ces bonnes lettres*, p. 177.

prête à mettre au pied de mon crucifix toute satisfaction, même légitime, pourvu que j'aïlle au ciel avec toute ma famille. Nous sommes encore six des enfants nés sous le toit paternel, cinq [two siblings died in infancy, bringing the total to eleven] dorment sous la pierre si froide du tombeau, puis Papa et Maman nous ont aussi devancés. Ah ! qu'il me tarde de les voir dans le sein de Dieu, où j'espère les rencontrer pour ne plus jamais m'en séparer !"<sup>79</sup>

Sister is particularly insistent vis-à-vis her brother Langevin and concentrates on two elements: his stubborn "silence" to her letters and his lack of religious practice:

Ecoute, mon cher frère Langevin. C'est toi qui es le père de Belle Dame, car tu lui as servi de père lors de son Mariage, car tu es son aîné. tu es aussi le père des 4 enfants de notre pauvre frere louis, et si ces enfants venaient à se négliger pour leur Religion, comment pourrais-tu leur dire de se confesser, de faire leur pâques, si tu ne fais pas les devoirs religieux toi-même... Elmire, Marie, Belle Dame, me disent tous que je dois remplacer bonne Maman, eh! bien sera tu le seul qui me tourneras le dos et se moqueras toujours de mes charitables avis? Si maman vivait te tirais tu de ses conseils?<sup>80</sup>

The functions of family roles must be fulfilled, even in the absence of the biological owners of these roles. Langevin, by right of being the only living older brother, must act as father to Damase as well as to the orphan nephews; Sister, by right of attribution and appropriation, acts as his mother. Sister was angry with Langevin not only for his passive refusal to participate in the "pacte épistolaire" but also because she feared that his behaviour extended to a lapse of religious practice. The repetition of these themes in her letters illustrates the close link between faith practice and kin practice in nineteenth-century French-Canadian populations.

### *The Next Generation of Kin-Keepers*

Sister may have inherited her kin-keeping role from her biological mother, but her celibate status did not prevent her from training her successors: her nieces and grandnieces. Her correspondence included not only her siblings, but also their daughters and granddaughters. In her letters to these young women, including her nieces in Walla Walla, she both encourages and manipulates them to write to their far-away relatives: "L'ainée Azélie est assez avancée ; elle vient de me donner des nouvelles de la famille, je lui demande de vous écrire au moins tous les trois mois ; si elle ne le fait, je ne lui écrirai plus ; et comme je sais qu'elle aime beaucoup à avoir des lettres de moi, je sais qu'elle vous écrira."<sup>81</sup>

As a result of this multiplication of correspondents, all urged on by Sister, Mary Parmelia received more letters from Montreal relatives than she could

<sup>79</sup> WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_009v, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, July 8, 1891.

<sup>80</sup> WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_055r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 12, 1896.

<sup>81</sup> WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_008v, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Clément Bergevin, Dec.18, 1880. No evidence exists that Azélie ever wrote to Walla Walla; however, this letter antedates Damase's marriage to Mary Parmelia.

answer (perhaps partly because she had to write to them in French). We can guess at the pyramid scheme set in motion by that first Christmas letter of 1882 from the following 1895 passage, in which three correspondents—Léonie, Augustine, and Elmire—complain to Sister that they have not received an answer to their last letter to Walla Walla : “Dis donc à Parmélia que Léonie, Augustine, Elmire attendent des nouvelles de vous tous, que si Parmélia n’a pas le temps d’écrire fasse qu’elle réponde Léonie, nous ne demandons pas de longues lettres, quand ce sont les enfants qui écrivent.”<sup>82</sup> The frequency of these requests for a reply suggests that while Mary Parmelia did sustain contact with the entire extended group in Montreal, it was not an equal exchange. After hearing from just two correspondents in 1885, Mary Parmelia in 1894 and 1895 received mail in French from half a dozen people, most of whom wrote on behalf of a group.

Sister suggests that she solve the problem in the same manner that it started, by engaging the next generation of women in the chain of kin-keepers. Léonie, or Eléonie, was Mary Parmelia’s oldest daughter, and almost 14 at this point. During the six months Eléonie spent in Quebec with her father in 1893, she learned to write passably well in French, and wrote regularly to her mother and brothers in both English and French. After her return, two letters from Arilda Rodrigue to her parents, Mary Parmelia and Damase, suggest that Eléonie also exchanged a few personal letters with her Montreal cousins in 1893 and 1894. Nothing in the letters preserved, however, indicates that she ever took over the kin keeper role from her mother.<sup>83</sup>

### **End of Story / End of Network**

The dissolution of the Bergevin’s Walla Walla–Montreal connection tells us as much about the network function of the family’s kinkeepers as did its creation. The extant letters indicate a 28-year connection, from 1885 to 1913, evenly distributed around Sister’s death in 1899. Forty-one letters from the Montreal network date to the 14 years before Sister’s death, and 28 after. Sixteen of the post-1899 letters are from Damase’s godson, and deal with a request for a copy of Damase’s birth record, and money for funeral masses.<sup>84</sup> If we exclude the godson’s letters, the same group that wrote 41 letters before Sister’s death produced only 12 in the years that followed.

The abrupt reduction in exchanges goes beyond the simple fact of mortality. Of the six remaining Bergevin siblings alive during the years 1885–1913, Catherine (Bésote) died in 1887, Clément (Langevin) in 1895, Victoire (Sister) in 1899, Elmire and Clémence in 1892, and Marie and Damase in 1911. Three of the four

82 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O’Byrian Papers, WCMss 343\_051v, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 29, 1895.

83 Eléonie married and left home in 1900. Mary Parmelia Allard Bergevin died in 1922. The letters preserved were saved by her or by her son’s family, who lived on in the house. If indeed Eléonie wrote to Montreal after her mother’s death (which seems unlikely, as the exchange had already been fallow for a number of years), no trace remains.

84 There are very few references to money in the letters. Sister sometimes thanks Damase and Mary Parmelia for donations to her school, but there is no evidence that the Walla Walla family was sending money to the family in Quebec on a regular basis. Money, or the lack of it, is often discussed in the letters, but these passages do not appear to function as requests.

Montreal sisters thus outlived Sister. Each also had a daughter who carried out the kinkeeper function, and who wrote to Walla Walla on behalf of the family, and those daughters were all still living in 1913.

The collection's last letter from Sister herself was written on May 29, 1899. She was weak and ill, and returning to Montreal:

Dearest,

I am very weak. I will return to Montréal at the end of June. I must try if a complete rest would do me good. I am pleased to hear that all well. Elmiere is extremely feeble. she cannot live long. next will be Sister Victoire. I long to see God. Cannot write long. I feel too tired. 1000 kisses to you that I love so much. Put dear Langevin in your album.

Sister Victoire

Pray for me.<sup>85</sup>

Previous letters make it clear that for Sister, the family photo album was its own kind of gathering, one way that the siblings might yet be “together” in this life. By including the picture of her deceased brother Clément (Langevin) in this last letter with the request to place him in the family album, she continues her work at metaphorical reunion. Her last act of this kind was her deathbed request to send her rosary to Damase, a gift that embodied her hope to see him again in heaven.<sup>86</sup>

Sister died on November 20, 1899, at the SNJM mother house at Hochelaga, now an industrial suburb of Montreal, at the age of 66. Family members in Montreal—Léose, Elmiere, Marie, and the other nieces—visited her regularly during her final illness. Kin keeper to the end, during these last visits from her family Sister admonished them yet again to write. Her niece Léose Poirier Rodrigue (Elmiere's daughter) wrote the letter announcing her death, but the last missive from Montreal written as a direct response to Sister's urgings came some weeks later from another niece, Clémence Vinet (1846-1939), daughter of Catherine :

[Sr Marie Augustin] me dit lorsque je lai vus la derniere fois ma chere je suis bien malade mes pauvre nerfe sont ruinée et bien je vas mourir et je vas aller voire mon Dieu pour me reposer de toutes mes fatigues et j'espere revoir la hau au ciel tous nos chere parents qui sont la dans cette patrit qui bientôt vons nous rejoindre, ... elle ma dit je ne peut plus ecrire depuis longtemps je veux que tu ecrive pour moi a tes Oncle et dit leur que je suis bien malade et jai toujours négliger mais me veyla enfin.<sup>87</sup>

85 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_060r, Sr Marie Augustin to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, May 29, 1899.

86 “Les Religieuses nous ont dit lorsque nous sommes allé la voir qu'elle avait eu une mort tres douce ... Avant de mourir elle nous a fait promettre de vous envoyer pour vous chez Oncle son chapelet sur lequel elle prie depuis qu'elle est en communaute c'est disait-elle le plus beau cadeau qu'elle pourrait vous faire. Donc priez pour elle sa dernière pensée a été pour vous tous.” WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_127r, Léose Poirier Rodrigue to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec. 1899.

87 WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_333v, Clemence Vinet to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Dec.24, 1899.

This letter from December 1899 is the last example of a conversation with Sister that prompts a letter to Walla Walla. Clémence Vinet doesn't write for many weeks after the visit narrated in this letter, finally taking up the task on December 24. She knew by then that Léose had already written to announce Sister's death, and her letter begins with the typical holiday greetings of the season, and a long passage reminiscing about attending midnight mass as children together. Though a niece, Clémence was the daughter of the oldest Bergevin daughter, only six years younger than Damase, and had first-person memories of their childhood. But this letter does not cement a new kin-keeping relationship. Although it contains all the marks of previous nodal letters—it narrates a real-life conversation about those absent, refers to shared memories, and offers holiday greetings—it is the last in the collection from this branch of the family. Without Sister to reinforce the connection, it faded away.

There are only two more letters in the collection from Léose Poirier Rodrigue. In 1902, she writes a very short letter to say that her mother Elmire (Damase's sister), has died, and indicates as well that it has been a very long time since she heard news from Walla Walla. She does not write again until 1909: "[C]'est vraie chère Tante que je ne vous ai pas écrit mais cela m'empêche pas que je ne vous ai pas oublier: non au contraire j'y pense souvent parce que la famille est si deserte, nous n'en avons plus en Canada il y a que ma Tante Marie qui vit et papa et mon Oncle Gobeil qui vit les autre sont tous mort et ma Tante Marie n'a pas pour bien longtemp ni papa."<sup>88</sup>

It is the same story, resurfacing again and again in an era of mass outmigration from Quebec: once we were a great family, now we are nearly gone. Léose Poirier Rodrigue had a very large family of her own. In 1909, she had nine living children, and probably 100 first and second cousins living in the immediate area, without counting cousins from the generation of her grandparents. When she grieves for the lost family, it is the nuclear family of her mother's generation that she mourns, using her mother's (Elmire's) words. This refrain appeared in her previous letters as well, once in 1888 and then in more detail in 1889.<sup>89</sup> Her 1909 letter ended on a tragic note: it was midnight and her father, now suffering from severe dementia, has begun his nightly ramble and will not let her write. He died two months later; nothing indicates that Léose ever wrote to Walla Walla again.

Elmire's plaint, communicated to Mary Parmelia and Damase through her kinkeeper daughter, echoes a theme of loss in Sister's letters. Did this family consider itself lost because a generation was dying, or because no brothers remained in Montreal to pass on the patronymic of their branch? Many other Bergevins lived in the Beauharnois–Montreal area, descendants of Damase and Elmire's uncles, but, aside from a few references to more distant relatives in

88 WCNA, Denise Bergevin O'Bryan Papers, WCMss 343\_141v, Léose Poirier Rodrigue to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Feb. 7, 1909.

89 "Je me rappelle toujours que maman me disait, j'ai des frere bien loin, et peut-être je ne les reverrais jamais. Oh cruel souvenir, jamais, qu'il est douloureux pour une famille qui etait si grande, et presque tous sont paris pour l'éternité leurs souvenir ne s'effaceront jamais de ma memoire." WCNA, Russell Bergevin Family Papers, WCMss 344\_319r, Léose Poirier Rodrigue to Damase and Mary Parmelia Bergevin, Jan. 12, 1889.

Sister's letters, they do not appear to be part of the Montreal sisters' lives. The "family" that these conversations and letters tell (and establish and re-create in the telling) is defined by the patronym, fractured by the migration of the brothers, and ends with this generation.

Evidence suggests that Mary Parmelia wrote only two more letters to the Montreal sisters after Sister's death in 1899. Léose does not seem to be aware of them. The sharing of information that happened when the sisters would gather to greet Sister no longer took place after the death of that generation. Did the kin network die out because the key kin keeper (Sister) died in 1899? Or because the narrative of family identity on which it was based did not contain a future?

The deaths of Damase Bergevin's sisters in Montreal ended not the story but the all-important storytelling—the oral tradition of family unity despite separation. Mary Parmelia and the nieces lived after Sister's death, but no longer corresponded without the voices and memories of the Montreal sisters to drive them. Once the generation of people who knew each other face to face died, the correspondence died along with it.<sup>90</sup> What is perhaps more extraordinary is that it ever existed in the first place, given the number of correspondents involved who had no personal memories of each other.

The point of dissolution of the transnational kin network is a promising direction for further research. For the Bergevin family, the crucial element dissolving the network may have been not the deaths of the siblings, but rather the nature of the family story itself. Although the siblings actively engaged their daughters as family kin keepers for a transcontinental network, the family identity that they passed on through their repeated traumatic refrain of separation did not include their children. The kin keepers who wrote the letters were never part of the family story that they transcribed. When the dictators stopped dictating—when the oral tradition died out with the sibling group of Damase and Sister's generation—the kin network died as well.

90 The demise of an immigrant correspondence with the death of the last generation possessing living memory of the far-away family plays out very similarly in the corpus that Jean Le Bihan examines. His article on the correspondence between the Le Bihan siblings after their migration to Canada from Brittany in the early twentieth century concludes with the deaths of the entire sibling group within less than ten years. Although the transatlantic contact preceding the siblings' deaths extended to other members of the family, it all ceased with their deaths, and the oral history of their descendants in Canada treats the point of migration as the origin story of the family, no longer remembering or retelling any previous generations in France. Le Bihan, "Enquête sur une famille Bretonne émigrée au Canada."



## Appendix 1: Bergevin Family Tree

This family tree represents descendants of Joseph Bergevin *dit* Langevin and Catherine LaBerge, parents of Damase Bergevin. It includes all nine of their living children. For the second generation, it names only those family members necessary for the reader to understand the relationship between authors or inferred authors used in this paper. Names in bold indicate that at least one document by that person appears in the collection. For names in italics, existing letters refer to letters by that person, but none survive. Women who appear in the article as the primary kin keepers are underlined. Unless I indicate otherwise, all authors on this list wrote in French. The abbreviations CAN and USA indicate the country of birth or death.

Joseph Bergevin *dit* Langevin 1799 CAN-1855 CAN  
m. Catherine Charlotte LaBerge 1801 CAN-1876 CAN

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Joseph Langevin Bergevin 1821 CAN-1873 USA  
No descendants

### **Catherine Bergevin 1822 CAN-1887 CAN**

m. Félix Vinet *dit* Larante 1816 CAN-1884 CAN

Joseph Vinet 1840 CAN-1889 CAN

**Arthur Vinet 1872 CAN-(USA)**

**Clémence Vinet dit Larente 1846 CAN-1939 CAN**

Louis Cornelius Bergevin 1823 CAN-1874 USA

m. Celina Forest 1846-1874

*Mary Elmere Bergevin 1868-1943*

*Joseph Augustus Bergevin 1871-1934*

### **Marie Bergevin 1826 CAN-1911 CAN**

m. Louis Lebœuf

**Matilde Lebœuf 1855-**

m. George Olier St Antoine 1850-

**\*Joseph Damase St Antoine 1893-**

**Liliose Lebœuf 1856-1937**

m. Isidore Girouard 1857-1937

**Albina Girouard 1886-**

Elmire Bergevin 1829 CAN-1902 CAN

**m. Hyacinthe Poirier 1828-1902**

**Lélioise Poirier 1852-1913**

m. Alfred Rodrigue 1847-

**Augustine Rodrigue 1877-**

**Arilda Rodrigue 1882-**

**Clémence Bergevin 1831 CAN-1892 CAN**

m. Joseph Gobeil 1824-1913

**Joseph Gobeil 1855-**

**\*Sœur Marie Augustin (Victoire) Bergevin ('Sister') 1833 CAN-1899 CAN**

No descendants

Clément Bergevin 1838 CAN-1895 USA

No descendants

Damase Bergevin 1840 CAN-1911 USA

m. *\*Mary Parmelia Allard 1855-1922*

**\*Eléonie Bergevin 1882 USA-1952 USA**

*Joseph Damase Bergevin Jr 1883 USA-1932 USA*

**Augustine Ann Bergevin 1894 USA-1987 USA**

\* Person wrote letters in both English and French.

\*\* Person wrote only in English.

## Appendix 2: Allard Family Tree

This family tree represents the Forest-Allard-Bergevin line (Mary Parmelia Allard's ancestors and children) as it appears in the Bergevin correspondence. It does not include all family members, only those necessary to understand the relationship between authors or inferred authors. Names in bold indicate that the collection contains at least one document by that person. For names in italics, existing letters refer to letters by that person, but none survive. Women who appear in the article as the primary kin keepers are underlined. Unless I indicate otherwise, all authors on this list wrote in English. The abbreviations CAN and USA indicate the country of birth or death.

Jean Baptiste Forest 1786 CAN-1858 CAN  
m. Thérèse Cloutier 1792 CAN-1866 CAN

*\*\*Joseph Forest 1816 CAN-1889 USA*  
m. Marguerite Pichez 1812 CAN-1881 USA

*\*\*Leocadie Forest 1834 CAN-1884 USA*  
m. Oliver Allard 1832 USA?-1895 USA

**Olivier Levi Allard 1858 USA-1941 USA**  
**m. Sophie Raymond 1864 USA-1916 USA**  
**Clyde C. Allard 1888 USA-1895 USA**

*\*Mary Parmelia Allard 1855 USA-1922 USA*  
m. Damase Bergevin 1840 CAN-1911 USA  
*\*Eléonie Bergevin 1882 USA-1952 USA*  
*Joseph Damase Bergevin Jr 1883 USA-1932 USA*  
**Augustine Ann Bergevin 1894 USA-1987 USA**

**Emma Allard 1868 USA-1901 USA**  
**Henry Allard 1873 USA-1899 USA**

*\*\*Alise Forest 1827 CAN-*

\* Person wrote letters in both English and French.

\*\* Person wrote only in French. In the case of Joseph Forest and Leocadie Forest, this is assumed, not known.

CANADIAN  
JOURNAL  
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ANNALES  
CANADIENNES  
D'HISTOIRE

*The Canadian Journal of History* actively seeks submissions concerned with gender and popular politics since 1945.

The most recent US presidential election highlighted in exceptional ways the connection between gender politics and populist politics. How do queer, race, and feminist theories shape emerging political identities in diverging ways? Topics need not be focused on American history, but rather should be guided by how great historic shifts have altered the dynamic between electorates, socio-economic elites, and governments: for example, the end of the Cold War; the war on terrorism; the financial crisis of 2008-2009; the downfall of the rustbelt and coal economies; hardening of borders and increasing xenophobia in light of the Syrian refugee crisis; Brexit and changing attitudes toward globalization. To what extent have new media technologies and resurgent media phenomena shaped debates about gender among various publics within nations, between nations, and across the globe?

This is an open call for papers and has no fixed deadline. Articles should not exceed 10,000 words, including notes. As a rule, footnotes should make up no more than 20 percent of the article's total word count. Please submit your work through our ScholarOne Manuscripts portal where you can also find our current style guide: [mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/cjh](http://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/cjh).

*Annales canadiennes d'histoire* lance un appel à contributions sur les croisements entre le sexe et les politiques populistes depuis 1945.

La récente élection présidentielle aux États-Unis a mise en relief les croisements entre le sexe et les politiques populistes. Comment les identités politiques sont-elles formées par les théories *queer*, raciale et féministe? Nous sommes intéressés à valoriser des articles qui explorent des bouleversements historiques qui ont modifié les relations entre l'électorat, les élites socio-économiques et les gouvernements. Par exemple, la fin de la guerre froide; la guerre contre le terrorisme; la crise financière de 2008-2009; l'échec des régions de l'industrie lourde (la *rust belt*) et des économies du charbon; le resserrement des frontières et la xénophobie provenant de la crise des réfugiés; et Brexit et le changement d'attitudes face à la mondialisation. Dans quelle mesure les nouvelles technologies des médias et la résurgence des phénomènes médiatiques façonnent-elles les discussions sur les questions sexospécifiques entre différents publics au sein des nations, entre les nations et à travers le monde?

Ceci est un appel ouvert sans délai fixé. Les articles ne doivent pas dépasser 12 000 mots, y compris les notes. En règle générale, les notes de bas de page ne doivent pas dépasser vingt pour cent du nombre total de mots. Veuillez soumettre votre article à notre système ScholarOne, où vous trouverez également notre guide de style: [mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/cjh](http://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/cjh).

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